

All the problems of interpreting the Bible – on two pages

The Problem: It may seem as if Christians have only two options for how to use Scripture – either be a relativist or an inerrantist.

The problem with using the Bible mechanically or woodenly:

- 1) An alcoholic says: “You have to forgive me....”
- 2) A chronically abusive spouse says: “You have to forgive me....”
- 3) A psychopath says: “You have to forgive me....”

The Bible has clear commands about forgiveness:

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but **if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses**” (Matt 6:14-15).

“Then Peter said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but **seventy times seven**” (Matt 18:21-22).

“And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not **forgive your brother from your heart**” (Matt 18:34-35).

The problem again: **Forgiveness** can become a gimmick used by bullies to manipulate family, friends, and co-workers.

A better way: The Lutheran way of interpreting the Bible

Luther: The Bible is the cradle that holds the Christ child.

“Scripture is not to be understood as against, but for Christ, hence it either refers to him, or is not to be reckoned true Scripture . . . For if opponents have pleaded Scripture against Christ, **let us plead Christ against Scriptures**” (*Luther’s Works* 34:112).

“For it is the duty of a genuine Apostle to proclaim Christ’s passion, death, and office, and to lay the foundation of faith in the same . . . And all genuine books agree in this, that they all proclaim and magnify Christ. Moreover, the true touchstone, by which all books are judged, is whether they glorify Christ or not, since all Scriptures presents Christ . . . What does not preach Christ is not Apostolic, even were Saint Peter or Paul to do so. Conversely, **what proclaims Christ is Apostolic, even if Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod were to do it**. But this James no longer does so, for he magnifies the Law and its works” (*Luther’s Works* 35: 396).

False authorities

- Not by bishops – they’re fallible

- Not by pastors – they’re fallible
- Not by scholars – it is not a matter of scholarly expertise
- Not by councils – they err
- Not by majority votes in congregations – they’re fallible
- Not by “taking the whole counsel of God” – Who decides what is the “whole counsel”? Not by what is clear, plain, and simple. When Luther writes about what is “clear” in the Bible, he means **what points to Christ**. See also Paul: 2 Cor 11:14: “The devil appears as an angel of light” – to others, but surely not to me!

The proper use of Scripture is determined **by the gospel itself**. Nothing in the Bible can be allowed to undermine the promise that **Christ did it all**. He won salvation for us on the cross:

“But it is certain that **any interpretation of the Scriptures** which weakens or even removes **this comfort and hope** is contrary to the Holy Spirit’s will and intent.” (*Book of Concord* (Formula of Concord, XI: 92, p. 632, Tappert).

The Lutheran threefold way of speaking about the **Word of God**:

First, the **Word** is **Jesus Christ** (John 1:1, 14).

Second, the **Word** is the **preaching** of the Word of the cross through which God gives salvation and creates faith (Rom 10:17; I Cor 1:18, 21).

Third, the **Word** is the **Holy Scriptures** which witnesses to Jesus Christ and testifies to the Word of the cross.

And always in that order: Jesus Christ, the preaching of Christ, the Bible.

We Lutherans take the Bible seriously, so seriously we can deal with its problems. Consider the following Bible texts:

“And [Jesus] said to them, “. . . Behold, I have given you authority to tread up serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you” (Luke 10:18-19).

“Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:29)

“And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. . .” (1 Thess 4:15-17). Paul believed the end of the world would come in his generation.

When dealing with moral problems today, we follow **Paul’s method**: “Love does no harm to the neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10). As Lutherans we want to know: What are the damages? How can we reduce harm?

Real love is often **tough love**. We use common reason, common sense, AA, the law. Sometimes being forgiving is wrong because it enables bad behavior. Sometimes we cannot help or fix a problem; we need to remove ourselves from the situation. We are not God. We are not all-knowing. We, too, can be wrong. We live at the foot of the cross, by forgiveness, even as we are fully engaged in the world in all its brokenness.